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ABSTRACT

Unfortunately, three of society's worst problems during the last decade--racism, sexism, and maladjusted parents--are reflected in the content of children's books. While censorship of books of questionable value is not recommended, it is necessary to judge and to find fault with them and ultimately to steer children into reading the good books which have also been written. Specific books do show definite racist and sexist bias, but others present blacks and women realistically without any suggestion of stereotypes. Although the most depressing of children's books are those depicting children with maladjusted parents, many books emphasize the loving and supportive relationships that can make the difference between healthy and unhealthy parents of the next generation. (JM)

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WHAT SHOULD WE CENSURE IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS?

This section of the conference is related to those issues in children's literature which reflect a changing world, changing children, and changing communication. Since this involves controversial issues, it seemed appropriate to examine them in terms of censorship.

Any expectation of a call to ban or burn Little Black Sambo, The Bobbsey Twins, or Nancy Drew (all fifty titles) will be unfulfilled, since I am defining censure in terms not of suppression or elimination, but rather as chiding, finding fault with, judging, and reproving.

Yes. I am here to chide, to find fault with, to judge, and to reprove authors and publishers of books which perpetuate the stereotyping of selected populations. In 1953, Lillian Smith wrote that..."The short history of children's literature has shown that many of the worst features of an era are accented in the children's books of each period."[1] Three of the worst societal problems of the last decade have stemmed from racism, sexism, and maladjusted parents. True to form, these features are accented in children's books of this period. In most instances, this has been through stereotyped characters.

Racism

In discussing racism, I will focus primarily upon Black literature, as

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1. Lillian Smith. The Unreluctant Years. Chicago: America Library Association, 1953, p. 34.

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there are many more representative titles available here. Books are slowly developing from other minority groups, but the selections are still limited in numbers.

Prior to World War II, racism was simply a case of absenteeism. When Black characters were actually included in a story, their descriptions were often downgrading, if not offensive, to the Black reader.

There were some inclusions, however. In the 1923 Newbery Award winner, The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle, which is still popular, the child reads about Prince Bump, who when attending Oxford University was afraid that he would be eaten by white cannibals, as he was ..."an ignorant native from Africa."[1]

Later attempts to portray Black children placed them in a setting which was not dissimilar to that of a white child. Illustrations were usually those of darkened white children. The purpose of the story was to provide a message, and the climax was pat. Bright April, Roosevelt Grady and Mary Jane were representative of this era. One is reminded of Isaac Singer's statement that..."When a writer tries to teach a lesson, he achieves nothing as an artist and nothing as a propagandist."[2]

The last fifteen years have shown marked improvement. Books about Black children appear to fall into three distinct categories. The first category includes Black children on an incidental basis. Examples would be Ezra Keats' The Snowy Day and Whistle for Willy, where the presence of a Black child is identified only through the illustrations. In Koningsburg's Jennifer, Hecate, MacBeth, William McKinley, and Me, Elizabeth and Snyder's

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1. Hugh Lofting. The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle. New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1922, p. 36.
2. Isaac Singer. From Down the Rabbit Hole by Selma G. Lanes. New York: Atheneum, 1971, p. 173.

The Egypt Game, recognition of this inclusion again comes primarily from the illustrations or brief comment, and the life-style is no different from that of the white, middle-class population. These books are all written by highly competent white authors.

In the second category, we find books written by white writers which are didactic in nature, but of a higher literary quality than that of Bright April or Roosevelt Grady. For example, both William Armstrong and Paula Fox showed compassionate commitment to the Black movement through Sounder and The Slave Dancer, respectively. The reader who is ignorant of the tragic treatment of the Black people will receive a more valuable lesson than could be found in a Social Studies textbook. Unfortunately, although both authors received Newbery awards for their outstanding contributions to the field of children's literature, the books have been reported to be highly offensive to the Black readers and educators. In spite of the implied message, Sounder is criticised because of its stereotyped subservient portrayal of the Southern Black man. The Slave Dancer has been offensive to Black critics because of the inclusions of what may be perceived as callous descriptions. For example, after being on the ship for several days with the slaves, the boy says,

> I hated the slaves! I hated their shuffling, their howling, their very suffering! I hated the way they spat out their food upon the deck, the overflowing buckets, the emptying of which tried all my strength. I hated the foul stench, that came from the holds no matter which way the wind blew, as though the ship itself were soaked with human excrement.[1]

Even though almost all of these slaves died on their way to the

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1. Paula Fox. The Slave Dancer. Scarsdale, New York: Bradbury Press, 1973, p. 91.

Western Hemisphere, it would take a fairly mature reader to establish a sincere empathy for them. Instead, one is more likely to relate to the problems of the slave dancer, himself.

The third approach to writing about the Black population is that of the Black writer describing segments of life as it is likely to exist. John Steptoe's Stevie, for example, in which Stevie recalls his little friend by saying, "We used to have some good times together. I think he liked my momma better than his own, cause he used to call his mother 'Mother' and he called my momma 'Mommy'. Aw, no! I let my corn flakes get soggy thinkin about him."[1] This may be contrasted to dialogue in Bright April in which April says to her mother, "Isn't it strange. We are having Easter Week at the same time they are having Passover week."[2] Obviously the first quotation is less stilted and reflects the speech of the urban Black child.

In Sam Cornish's Your Hand in Mine, the lonely little boy, Sam, says, "Teachers have mothers they don't go home to and this can make them very lucky or very lonely."[3] Although at a somewhat higher grammatical level, we can still denote the child-like syntax. Other examples might include Mildred Walter's Lillie of Watts, the story of the little Black girl living in the aftermath of the Watts fire, but facing only child-type problems, such as drying her sweater in an oven or temporarily losing a valuable cat. This is realistic fiction. You might see Lillie if you were driving through the Watts section of Los Angeles or through West Oakland. The language, the illustrations, and the experiences are real.

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1. John Steptoe. Stevie. New York: Harper & Row, 1969, p. 18.
2. Marguerite De Angeli. Bright April. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1946, p. 53.
3. Sam Cornish. Your Hand in Mine. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970, p. 30.

Recognition for the value of this genre of books is shown in the 1975 Newbery Award. Miss Virginia Hamilton has selected a unique environment in which to place M.C. Higgins, The Great. Unquestionably, there is a lesson to be learned about the implications of strip mining upon the rural population as described by Miss Hamilton. But the story is still that of a young Black boy coping with the problems of maturing in a changing world, where communication for him was particularly difficult.

In reading each of these books, the Black child can recognize that "Hey, this kid is just like me or someone I know!"

Should we eliminate or suppress the books in the first categories that I chided? As a long-time admirer of Ezra Keats and as one who celebrated the awards to Sounder and The Slave Dancer, I can in no way recommend that these books be taken away from the young readers. On the other hand, since the third category most honestly represents Black people without any suggestion of stereotyping, representative titles must be included in any collection of books for children.

I hope that in the next decade, we will see equally honest and pleasurable books about Chicano, Puerto Rican, Native Americans, and Jewish children, as well as other groups. It seems apparent that to best understand diversities of a multicultural society we need to listen to the voices from those cultures.

Sexism

I am not a militant thinker in women's liberation. I am glad, however, to see that journal articles as well as master and doctoral theses have been defining lists of books which show that girls are not only equal but probably superior to boys. I agree. Take Mary Poppins and Pippi Longstockings. However, I am really less concerned with equality or superiority

than I am with whether or not characters in children's books are achieving favorable results in their lives, regardless of their sex.

Positive sex roles in books seem most likely to be found in books where either a boy or a girl is the central character. These selections tend to provide a significant opportunity to show growth in character and self-identity. Karana in Island of the Blue Dolphins, Julie in Julie of the Wolves, and Yuki in Journey to Topaz exemplify the feminine potential. The parallel may be said of Miguel in And Now Miguel, David in North to Freedom, and Rufus Henry in Durango Street.

In contrast are those books in which one or both of the leading characters is shown to be weak and ineffectual in their relation to the opposite sex. I shall chide and find fault with any book in which the author exaggerates female servitude versus male callousness. In the recent flurry of realistic fiction, the tractlike novels feature girls as weepy and weak and the boys as egotistical heels. Dependence upon the whims of the male figure is highly streesed. In My Darling, My Hamburger, Liz is forced to undergo an abortion because she has not only let herself be seduced but has allowed the boy to resolve himself from responsibility through payment for the abortion. In Phoebe, we learn that nice girls don't get caught and the lads do not have to pay the piper. Trudy Draper in You Would If You Loved Me attempts that old teasing game and then resents it when her bluff is called and Tom becomes abusive and crude. In none of these books is there sensitive communication nor is depth of character explored at any length.

These semi-romantic tales are popular with girls in their puberty years, and they may serve as instructional handbooks if confronted by the male ego. On the other hand, they may lead to further subservience. Since few if any boys are apt to read them, I foresee no effect, either positive nor negative upon their behavior.

As long as these books are available they will be read. As long as they are being read, young people need to be exposed to alternatives. Mary Poppins and Pippi Longstockings, Phoebe and Trudy Draper will have little effect upon the feminine mystique; perhaps Karana and Julie will. Although teachers are more likely to be confronting boys who are reading sports books and Mad Magazine rather than realistic fiction, an occasional dose of Brady, The Year of the Racoon, and Johnny Tremain might serve as an antidote.

Maladjusted Parents

I see this as the most depressing of the three problem areas. Only in Utopia are all adults found to be supportive, fair, compassionate, reliable, and loving, in their relationships with their children. We all know some parents like that. It is becoming increasingly difficult to locate them in the new offerings of children's books.

In Harriet the Spy, all care and compassion comes from Ole Golly, her nursemaid, since her parents are oblivious to her needs. In the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler, Claudia runs away from home because she feels that she has not been treated fairly. In Ox, the Story of a Kid at the Top, Ox cannot relate to his wealthy, swinging parents who are commented upon by the chauffer, Charles, as follows: "Charles lit a cigar and started complaining about Mom wanting him to drive her to Miami that day. 'She wants to go to Miami,' he said, 'and your Dad will have a big hangover so that he won't want to drive himself to the Everglades for that first drink, so he'll want me to drive him, too. Well, I can't be in two places at once. I told her last weekend - if you both want to be driven different places, you better get two chauffeurs.'"[1]

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1. John Ney. Ox, The Story of a Kid at the Top. New York: Bantam, 1971, p. 1.

Neither can Hermann Vanden Kroote, Jr. relate to his parents in Call Me Bandicoot whose father and he are described thus:

"'That's old Hermann Vanden Kroote,' answered the uniformed doorman (at Hermann's apartment house) 'and the skinny nut in the gutter is Hermann Vanden Kroote, Jr.' 'Does the father sell munitions?' I asked. 'Heck no,' said the doorman, 'cigaretts. You know, Summertime regulars and Wintertime menthols, Mayfair Lady extra mild, and Copper Goddess pipe tobacco. He owns that huge Vanden Kroote building overlooking the harbor. That nut son of his won't take a nickel of his money, says he's selling sickness. Well, one of them is really sick, and it sure ain't old Pop. The young punks of today-'"[1]

Some parents are greatly concerned with solving society's problems but neglect those which are close to home. Such is the plight of Dinky Hocker in Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack. In fact her mother is described as... "Mrs. Hocker works very hard. She really cares about those young people. She's a very earnest woman, Tucker. This world could use more people like her, people who care what happens to the less fortunate."[2] In the meantime, Dinky's needs are grossly neglected. In Mom the Wolf Man and Me, Brett must learn to cope with her unmarried mother becoming interested in a potential husband, and Melissa Hammond in Heads You Win, Tales I Lose confronts the reality of a parents' marriage collapsing. "Mother was sitting at one end of the sofa. On the end table beside her was the decanter of bourbon and a glass with about an inch left at the bottom. The decanter was empty. Mother and I

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1. William Pene Du Bois. Call Me Bandicoot. New York: Harper & Row, 1970, p. 61.
2. M.E. Kerr. Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack! New York: Dell, 1972, p. 93.

stared at each other. "Well, she said..I hope you're satisfied. Your father has packed a bag and gone. Just as you suggested." "You mean to live with Miss Pierce?"[1]

Not one of these parents is without a live model. Every community is represented here. Shall children of these parents grow up believing that there are no alternatives even in story books? Fortunately, there are many books which stress the loving and supporting relationships which usually make the difference between healthy and unhealthy parents of the next generation.

Even that most controversial picture book Where the Wild Things Are shows Max giving and receiving love. In animal fantasies the parent image is strong. Russell Hoban's Frances books, Else Minarik's Little Bear Series, Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of the NIMH, and Charlotte's Web all demonstrate the warm parent-child relationship. In stories dealing with human type characters, we have Scott's Sam, Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series, Beverly Cleary's Henry Huggins books, Irene Hunt's Across Five Aprils and Madeline L'Engle's writings from A Wrinkle in Time through the Austin family books. Each of these shows a vision of family relationships which may offer a vicarious existence for those children whose lives do not include adults who are supportive, fair, and compassionate.

Childhood passes quickly and reading hours are few. If children select books which are of questionable value to read, and they will, I hope that teachers, librarians, and parents will introduce them to some of the wonderful books which can serve as a balance to their self-selected reading choices.

None of us can serve as a censor of books. We can censure content through guidance and selection. A. Whitney Griswold suggested in his Essays

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1. Isabelle Holland. Heads You Win, Tails I Lose. New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1973, p. 99.

on Education that the..."only sure weapon against bad ideas is better ideas." Children's books are filled with better ideas which can help them to meet their needs in this, a changing world.

Help them to find good books. The number doesn't matter as long as they experience a few which will remain a part of them. In 1764, Voltaire wrote, "It is with books as with men; a very small number play a great part."

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